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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that social studies educators need to develop their own definition of what social studies means and to let other persons know what this social studies looks like. It is contended that part of the problem concerning what social studies is and what place in the curriculum it should occupy is that social studies educators have let others (most notably students, parents, and educational critics) define the discipline for them. (DB)

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HOW DO YOU SPELL SOCIAL STUDIES?

By Susan Booth Larson

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By Susan Booth Larson

President, Oregon Council for the Social Studies

A man was simply wanting the phone number for the publication, "Theatre Arts", so he called Information. The operator came on the line and said, "Information, may I help you?"

He answered, "Yes, I'd like to know the phone number for 'Theatre Arts'."

There was a pause and she came back and said, "I'm sorry. We have no listing for a Theodore Artz."

He said, "No, you don't understand, I want a listing for the publication, 'Theatre Arts'."

There was a brief pause and she came back and said, "Sir, I just told you, there IS no such listing for a Theodore Artz."

By this time, his patience was running out, his voice raised, and he said, "Confound it, I need you to hear me, the publication, 'Theatre Arts', T-H-E-A-T-R-E! "

There was a lengthy pause on the other end of the line and then the operator answered with crushing finality, by saying in a very even voice, "Sir, ...that is NOT how you spell Theodore."

Did you know there are people who do not know how to spell Social Studies? They do not know what good Social Studies is, what it looks like in the classroom, or what the Social Studies research tells us makes a powerful Social Studies program K-12. Yet they continue to tell US how THEY spell Social Studies.

Do you ever feel just like that gentleman on the telephone, trying to communicate your professional knowledge about the spelling and the definition of good Social Studies, yet the telephone operator- in our case, possibly the students, the parents, and the wide array of educational critics- keep trying to offer their own pre-conceived notions of what Social Studies should be, how Social Studies should be spelled. It can be extremely frustrating, just like for that man making his phone call, to not be heard in how WE, the professionals, spell Social Studies.

Let's look now at the different ways others are trying to spell Social Studies and see how they have contributed to our "grammatical" crisis.

How do the students spell Social Studies? So often in research studies, we read how they spell Social Studies (and I quote): "boring", "a waste of time", "studying dead people", "too many facts and stupid dates". I call these students the "Brylcreem students"- "a little dab 'l do ya!" They are turned off by Social Studies and believe that "use more, only if you dare" is true! No matter what grade they are in, they have found Social Studies to be boring, and not relevant to their lives. They just want to "get Social Studies over with" quickly, without interfering with the interesting parts of their lives.

They probably did ask their teachers the $64 million dollar question, "Why do we have to do this?" and either got an answer they didn't understand, or no answer at all. These "Brylcreem students" unfortunately might spell Social Studies as "doing the end-of-chapter questions on page 119 PERIOD" . "Brylcreem students" spell Social Studies their own way, and can't fathom it spelled any differently.

Then there is the other group of students, who to carry the analogy a little further, I call the "Mousse students". If you have had the pleasure to read the label on a can of hair mousse, you will know that hair mousse promises to "add depth, texture, brilliance, and luster to even the most damaged hair". Well, the "Mousse students" partly understand the beauty of Social Studies. What they want in Social Studies is NOT boring. It is relevant to their individual lives EVERYDAY, and it is made up of meaningful and interesting ideas and activities EVERYDAY! If you ask these students how they spell Social Studies, their spelling might include an exciting activity they experienced, an emotional debate, a fascinating fieldtrip, a mock trial, a speaker who came to their classroom and touched their lives through a Social Studies topic, or an elementary classroom whose core was Social Studies, where the language arts, science, health, and other curricula revolved around the stimulating core of Social Studies, where it was FUN to get to do Social Studies!

But these "Mousse students" have only part of the spelling. They may partly understand and appreciate the "mousse" aspects of Social Studies, but they do not truly fathom the entire range and

purpose of Social Studies, as skilled teachers do, who have the professional experience and knowledge about students and the subject matter.

How do parents spell Social Studies? Let's start with the worst case first. Some parents out there spell Social Studies as being irrelevant to the lives of their children- as a waste of time for Johnny who definitely wants a technical career, and a waste of time for Sharon who is a mathematics whiz. How would YOU spell Social Studies to these parents? What would your rationale for Social Studies be? Or would you accept THEIR definition of Social Studies?

One of the best teachers I have ever known once told me, and unfortunately, it is sometimes easy to forget, that parents send to school the BEST children they have. Generally, the parents want the best for their kids and they want the school to help their kids with their lives, both in the present and in the future. They want their children to learn what they will need to know for happy lives, to make good decisions in all aspects of their lives, to get good jobs, and to do as well as or better than their parents have done. Parents usually know that the world is changing, that there is more to learn and that there is different material to learn. Parents are usually NOT wedded to having their children learn outdated or irrelevant material, and would generally spell Social Studies as being future-oriented and child-oriented as much as possible.

Also, parents usually appreciate whatever a teacher teaches, IF THEIR CHILDREN LOVE IT. If their children are challenged, eager to share what they've learned in school, or somehow getting public

recognition for their learning, the parents will generally love how the teacher is spelling Social Studies, but may not fully understand exactly why the teacher is spelling Social Studies in that way.

But if the teacher can't communicate his or her spelling of Social Studies, and if the students are unchallenged and unhappy, then the parents may ask for what THEY think is needed, their own spelling of Social Studies. And all too often, their own narrow perspectives may come into play in this definition- what THEY remember having learned, what THEY think they remember reading and doing in school, or how they have heard others spell Social Studies, perhaps in the newspapers from the educational critics. If parents don't understand YOUR spelling of Social Studies, they will replace it with their OWN spelling and ask for it instead.

Let's turn now to the educational critics and THEIR spelling of Social Studies. As we all know, many groups locally and throughout the country have been making the case for adding more history, geography, economics, drug education, sex education, AIDS education, citizenship education, nuclear education, character education, recycling education, education about city and county government, etc, etc, etc to the Social Studies curriculum. Test results, international cross-cultural comparisons, public opinion polls, (and I would say, their own agendas) have been cited as rationales for spelling Social Studies in the ways they demand.

In our own state, we are currently in a revolution in education, with a number of earth-shaking proposals to change education, coupled with the devastating problems before us of financing a

sound educational system. All of these will affect how we spell Social Studies, how much Social Studies we can deliver, what kind of Social Studies it is, when we can deliver this Social Studies, etc., etc., etc.

Who will determine just how this NEW Social Studies is spelled? So many segments of the public, both local and national, want to succeed with THEIR own version, and cram their favorite letter into the spelling. But, this just won't work in a time of limited resources, and it is certainly unprofessional to spell Social Studies in this way.

My belief is that YOU, the leaders in the Social Studies profession in Oregon, must be the group that tells how YOU think Social Studies should be spelled. Even more than that, each of you as individual teachers must spell Social Studies the way that will work best with YOUR own students,whether they are "Brylcreem students" or "Mousse students" or others. YOU must spell Social Studies because only YOU know the goals of YOUR local communities, YOUR local resources, YOUR own parent groups, and YOUR own experiences. YOU are the only persons who can know how Social Studies can be spelled and work in YOUR work situations. You are in the best possible position to define Social Studies.

Why should we allow the educational critics, or the parents or the students to be the ones to define Social Studies? Would the medical profession allow US to tell them how to perform open-heart surgery? Would NIKE allow US to tell them how to design "Air Jordans"? But we must communicate our professional ideas about the Social Studies. We can not assume that THEY know what makes a

good Social Studies program. We must be willing to be vocal and tell everyone how WE spell Social Studies.

How DO you spell Social Studies? What makes good Social Studies and why? I urge you to take the time to clarify your definition of Social Studies for yourself, in your situation and list the reasons why you spell Social Studies in the way you do. Then, take the numerous opportunities available and TELL everyone you know just what good Social Studies looks like, why Social Studies is important, and why we teach it. This is YOUR case, as a leader in the Social Studies profession in Oregon, for the Social Studies.

Tell your students how YOU spell Social Studies and why. Tell the parents how YOU spell Social Studies and why. Tell the educational critics how YOU spell Social Studies and why. Then, no one, not even a telephone operator, will DARE tell you how Social Studies should be spelled!